

Message Text

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O R 261614Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2818
INFO AMMMBASSY AMMAN 1350
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AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY NICOSIA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
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AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
USMISSION USUN NY
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USCINCEUR
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 4 TEL AVIV 5570

DEPT FOR NEA/IAI FOR AMBASSADOR LEWIS

E. O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR PINT IS
SUBJ: THE BEGIN VISIT: UNFOCUSED, LOW-KEYED FOREIGN POLICY
DEBATE NOT YET TRANSLATED INTO FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE

1. BEGIN SUMMARY. ON THE EVE OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S
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VISIT, A SOMETIMES FALTERING AND UNFOCUSED DEBATE
IS UNDERWAY OVER THE GOVERNMENT'S PEACE POLICY. TO
DATE IT HAS NOT YET BROUGHT CLARITY TO THE ISSUES OR
CAPTURED THE ATTENTION OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC. ALTHOUGH
"PEACE NOW", THE ORGANIZED EXPRESSION OF DISSENT TO
BEGIN'S POLICY, CONTINUES TO ATTRACT PROMINENT SUPPORT-
ERS, ITS MESSAGE HAS THUS FAR NOT MOVED THE MAN IN

THE STREET. DEVELOPMENT OF THIS DEBATE, STALLED BY LAST MONTH'S TERRORIST ATTACK AND THE IDF RETALIATION, WAS FURTHER HINDERED BY: PERCEIVED U.S. PRESSURE TO TOPPLE BEGIN; GOI MOVES TO MEET CRITICISM BY A FREEZE (PARTIAL) ON SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY IN THE TERRITORIES AND A REFORMULATION OF ITS INTERPRETATION OF 242; AND BEGIN'S CLAIM THAT HIS POLICY REPRESENTS A NATIONAL CONSENSUS. MEANINGFUL DEBATE HAS ALSO BEEN HAMPERED BY THE WEAKNESS OF AN OPPOSITION PARTY WHICH, WHILE GENERALLY ESPOUSING MORE MODERATION, HAS A CREDIBILITY PROBLEM BECAUSE OF ITS EARLIER ATTACKS FROM THE RIGHT.

2. THE FOREIGN POLICY PICTURE IS NOT COMPLETELY STATIC. WHILE THE INITIAL EFFECT OF BEGIN'S FAILURE IN WASHINGTON AND THE TALK OF REPLACING HIM WAS A "RALLYING AROUND BEGIN" BY COALITION LEADERS, -- A REFLECTION OF HIS PERSONAL POWER AS WELL AS A REACTION TO PERCEIVED FOREIGN PRESSURE -- GROWING DISQUIET AMONG THEIR CONSTITUENTS IS EVIDENT AND PRESSURES ARE BUILDING ON CABINET MINISTERS TO REFLECT THIS DISCONTENT. MUCH OF THE DMC IS OPENLY CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY; NRP DOVES ARE INCREASINGLY ASSERTIVE; AND THE LIKUD PARTY HAS SHOWN NEW UNREST WITH THEIR PARTNERSHIP WITH HERUT. HOWEVER, IN THE DOMAIN OF FOREIGN POLICY ONLY TWO MINISTERS, ASIDE FROM BEGIN, HAVE REAL CLOUT -- DAYAN AND WEIZMAN. WHILE WEIZMAN, CONFIDENTIAL

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PRE-OCCUPIED WITH LEBANON, HAS REVERTED TO A CAUTIOUS STANCE FOLLOWING THE FLOP OF HIS THINLY-DISGUISED CHALLENGE TO BEGIN, DAYAN IS SHOWING SIGNS (ALBIET RATHER WEAK) OF INDEPENDENCE ON WEST BANK POLICY AND SEEMS TO BE PRESSING BEGIN FOR AT LEAST TACTICAL MODERATION ON THAT FRONT. THE RECENT REFORMULATION OF THE GOI'S INTERPRETATION OF 242 APPEARS TO BE THE FIRST FRUIT OF THAT EFFORT. WHETHER THERE WILL BE A GREATER HARVEST IS A MATTER THAT RESTS WITH BEGIN, WHO RETAINS TIGHT CONTROL OVER FOREIGN POLICY. HE HAS BECOME DISILLUSIONED AND PESSIMISTIC OVER PEACE PROSPECTS, BUT THUS FAR REMAINS INCAPABLE OF OVERCOMING HIS IDEOLOGICAL HANGUPS, A NECESSARY DEVELOPMENT FOR COMPROMISE ON THE WEST BANK. ANY FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE OVER BEGIN'S OPPOSITION WOULD ENTAIL HIS DOWNFALL -- A POSSIBILITY NOT YET IN SIGHT. END SUMMARY

3. FIVE MONTHS AFTER SADAT'S DRAMATIC VISIT, ISRAELIS ARE BEGINNING TO DEBATE JERUSALEM'S RESPONSE TO HIS BOLD INITIATIVE AND TO QUESTION THE DIRECTION OF THEIR GOVERNMENT'S POLICY. THERE IS DISAGREEMENT OVER WHO

HAS TO MAKE THE NEXT MOVE - ISRAEL OR EGYPT - AS WELL AS ARGUMENT ABOUT THE SPECIFICS OF BEGIN'S PEACE PROPOSALS, PARTICULARLY AS THEY RELATE TO THE WEST BANK. THIS INTROSPECTION, HOWEVER, DOES NOT HAVE WIDE-SPREAD PARTICIPATION AND HAS NOT YET DEVELOPED INTO A GREAT DEBATE OF THE ISSUES. FOR THE MOST PART IT IS UNFOCUSED. THE PUBLIC HAS THUS FAR NOT BEEN DEEPLY STIRRED AND THE OPPOSITION PARTIES HAVE FAILED TO TRANSLATE THEIR VIEWS INTO A MEANINGFUL CHALLENGE.

4. WHILE THE PEACE NOW MOVEMENT REPRESENTS THE MOST OBVIOUS EXPRESSION OF POPULAR, GRASSROOTS DESIRE FOR A CHANGE IN POLICY, ITS INITIAL SUCCESS HAS NOT BEEN FOLLOWED BY A SHARP DEFINING OF THE ISSUES. AFTER A
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BRIEF HIATUS WHEN IT WAS SEARCHING FOR AN ADEQUATE

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

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AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 4 TEL AVIV 5570

ENCORE TO THE RESERVISTS' LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER AND ITS APRIL 1 RALLY, IT IS NOW RECEIVING FRESH PUBLICITY FROM PROMINENT BACKERS. PEACE NOW'S LATEST ACHIEVEMENTS INCLUDE PUBLIC STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT FROM IMPORTANT AMERICAN JEWS, WELL-KNOWN ISRAELI ACADEMICIANS AND FROM TEN KNESSET MEMBERS. LAST WEEK EVEN BEGIN RECEIVED A PEACE NOW DELEGATION. HOWEVER, THE MOVEMENT'S MESSAGE HAS NOT GENERATED UNREST NOR GALVANIZED MASS SUPPORT --
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PREREQUISITE DEVELOPMENTS FOR EFFECTING AN EARLY CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT POLICY. THE RIVAL EFFORT, "SECURE PEACE", IS LESS A MOVEMENT THAN AN ATTEMPT TO SHOW THAT THE CRITICS DO NOT HAVE A MONOPOLY ON ENTHUSIASM. PERHAPS ITS ONLY ATTAINMENT IS IN INDICATING THAT ISRAEL IS NOT PREDOMINANTLY ON ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER OF THE PEACE ISSUES.

5. THE FAILURE OF THE DEBATE TO CATCH FIRE IS NOT FOR LACK OF INTEREST OR POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION AMONG ISRAELIS. IT CAN BE EXPLAINED IN PART BY EVENTS THAT HAVE SERVED TO BLUR THE ISSUES AND TO CHECK A TENDENCY TOWARD POLARIZATION. FIRST THERE WAS THE TRAUMA OF THE MARCH 11 TERRORIST ATTACK, FOLLOWED BY NATIONWIDE SUPPORT OF THE IDF'S RETALIATORY INCURSION. ISRAELIS DO NOT LIGHTLY CRITICIZE THE IDF WHEN IT IS ENGAGING THE ENEMY AND THE GOVERNMENT INITIALLY BENEFITTED FROM THE VIRTUAL WAR-TIME COHESION THESE EVENTS GENERATED. LAST MONTH'S CARTER-BEGIN TALKS OCCURRED AT THE CLIMAX OF THE LEBANESE OPERATION. WHILE UNDERSCORING USG-GOI DIFFERENCES AND AROUSING STRONG ISRAELI ANXIETY OVER EROSION IN SUPPORT FROM THEIR ONLY IMPORTANT ALLY, THE TALKS WERE IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED BY A "RALLYING AROUND BEGIN" AS THE PUBLIC AND PRESS REACTED TO PERCEIVED AMERICAN PRESSURE ON THE PRIME MINISTER. THE PICTURE OF AN EMBATTLED PM WAS HEIGHTENED BY WHAT ISRAELIS SAW AS PERCIPITATE ACTION BY THE US IN SPURRING A UN RESOLUTION BEFORE HIS ARRIVAL. THE UNITY FORGED BY THIS PERCEPTION IS ONLY NOW BEGINNING TO DISSIPATE AS, INTER ALIA, CRITICISM OF THE LEBANESE INCURSION BY THE PRESS AND EXPERT OPINION BEGINS TO SINK IN.

6. TWO GOVERNMENT MOVES TOWARD MEETING THE
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DEMANDS OF ITS PEACE CRITICS HAVE BEEN PERHAPS
ALMOST AS EFFECTIVE AS THIS (REAL OR IMAGINED) OUTSIDE
PRESSURE IN FORESTALLING DEBATE: THE PARTIAL FREEZE ON
SETTLEMENT ACTIVITY IN THE TERRITORIES AND THE NEW
FORMULATION OF THE GOI'S INTERPRETATION OF 242. THE
FIRST PUT A TEMPORARY HALT ON MACHINATIONS THAT WERE
WIDELY SEEN AS TRANSPARENT, INEPT, NEEDLESSLY PROVOCATIVE
AND DAMAGING TO ISRAEL'S IMAGE. THE REINTERPRETATION OF 242
IS TOO RECENT FOR ITS FULL EFFECT ON THE DOMESTIC SCENE,
OR LACK THEREOF, TO BE EVIDENT. WHILE MOST OBSERVERS
REGARD IT AS AN ATTEMPT AT SEMANTIC SLEIGHT-OF-HAND,
IT MAY STILL SATISFY THAT LARGE SEGMENT OF THE PUBLIC
SEARCHING FOR EVIDENCE THAT BEGIN IS NOT INTRANSIGENT.
FOR THE MOMENT, AT ANY RATE, IT APPEARS TO HAVE
MET THE DMC'S NEED TO SQUARE ITS PLATFORM WITH GOVERN-
MENT POLICY. A FEW PEOPLE SUGGEST THAT THE SUBTLE RE-
DEFINITION MAY IN FACT BE THE FIRST TENTATIVE STEP
TOWARD A POLICY CHANGE; THAT IT IS A CAREFULLY MEASURED
COMBINATION OF TESTING THE WATER AND PREPARING THE
GOVERNMENT'S RIGHT WING CONSTITUENCY FOR FUTURE ACCEPTANCE
OF THE PRINCIPLE OF TERRITORIAL COMPROMISE ON THE WEST
BANK. IT IS POINTED OUT THAT THE RABIN GOVERNMENT USED
A SIMILAR TACTIC IN THE SUMMER OF 1975 WHEN BACKING AWAY
FROM ITS EARLIER REJECTION OF EGYPT'S PROPOSALS FOR A
SINAI II AGREEMENT. MORE LIKELY, THE NEW FORMULATION
REPRESENTS THE MOST DAYAN COULD EXTRACT FROM BEGIN IN
WHAT SEEMS TO BE THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S EFFORTS TO GET
AROUND THE 242 IMPASSE.

7. ATTEMPTING TO PORTRAY NATIONAL CONSENSUS WITH ITSELF
AS ITS INTERPRETOR, THE GOVERNMENT IS NOT ABOVE A LITTLE
DISSIMULATION. BEGIN REPEATEDLY SPEAKS OF A COMMUNIST-ARMED
ARAFATIST STATE WITHIN RIFLE SHOT OF THE KNESSET AND 15 KM'S
FROM TEL AVIV AS THE ALTERNATIVE TO "NO WITHDRAWAL
FROM THE WEST BANK." SINCE MOST ISRAELIS OPPOSE A
WEST BANK PALESTINIAN STATE AND TOTAL WITHDRAWAL TO
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THE 1967 LINES, GOVERNMENT SPOKESMEN GO ON SIMPLISTICALLY
TO ARGUE THAT MAINSTREAM ISRAEL SUPPORTS BEGIN'S
REJECTION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF WITHDRAWAL AS APPLIED TO

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 3 OF 4 TEL AVIV 5570

THE WEST BANK. THE CLAIM TO NATIONAL CONSENSUS WORKS
T LEAD MANY INTO RELEGATING MODERATE CRITICS OF
BEGIN'S POLICY TO THE LEFTIST FRINGE.

8. WHILE THE LABOR ALIGNMENT OPPOSITION HAS BEGUN
HITTING AWAY AT THE GOVERNMENT ON THE APPLICABILITY
OF 242 TO THE WEST BANK, IT STILL HAS A LONG WAY TO
TRAVEL BEFORE ITS IMAGE AS A COHERENT FORCE IS ESTABLISHED.
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IT SPEAKS WITH MANY CONFLICTING VOICES, FORM YOSSE SARID

TO ISRAEL GALILI. MORE SERIOUS, ITS CREDIBILITY AS AN OPPONENT TO BEGIN'S INTRASIGENCE BEARS THE BURDEN OF EARLIER ATTACKS ON BEGIN FOR GIVING AWAY TOO MUCH IN THE SINAI. FINALLY, THE ALIGNMENT HAS TO TREAD CAREFULLY FOR SIMPLE REASONS OF PATRIOTISM, LEST IT GO TOO FAR AND APPEAR TO UNDERMINE THE GOI'S NEGOTIATING POSITION.

9. WHILE A DEGREE OF SURFACE UNITY AND AGREEMENT PREVAILS AMONG THE COALITION PARTIES, THERE ARE UNDERCURRENTS OF PRESSURE FOR CHANGE. WE SEE HINTS OF DISMAY AT THE PRECIOUS ASSET (AS SEEN FROM HERE) OF AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION SUPPORT IS WASTING AWAY IN THE CONTROVERSY OVER BEGIN'S POLICY. HOWEVER, THE INITIAL REACTION OF COALITION LEADERS TO BEGIN'S UNSUCCESSFUL WASHINGTON VISIT LAST MONTH, THE ALLEGED U.S. DESIRE FOR HIS REPLACEMENT AND WEIZMAN'S UNTIMELY CALL FOR A "NATIONAL PEACE COALITION," WAS TO STAND UP AND BE COUNTED FOR BEGIN. NOTWITHSTANDING A BRIEF FLURRY OF ENTHUSIASM FOR WEIZMAN IN THE PRESS AND WITHIN THE LIBERAL PARTY AND DMC, CABINET MEMBERS COMPETED IN DECLARING THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE PRIME MINISTER. MORE THAN A KNEE-JERK REACTION TO OUTSIDE PRESSURE, THE SUPPORT DEMONSTRATED THE PERSONAL POWER THAT BEGIN CONTINUES TO WIELD WITHIN THE CABINET WHICH INHIBITS DISSENT AND ANY MOVE TO CHALLENGE HIM.

10. NONETHELESS, A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF GROWING DISQUIET IS EVIDENT AMONG RANK AND FILE MEMBERS OF THE COALITION PARTIES WHICH IS INEVITABLY TRANSMITTED TO CABINET MINISTERS. THE FERMENT IS PARTICULARLY NOTICEABLE IN THE DMC, WHICH HAS SOME SIX MK'S OPENLY CRITICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT'S POLICY AND SKEPTICAL OF

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ARGUMENTS THAT A DMC DEFECTION FROM THE COALITION WOULD INVITE CHAOS. THE DOVES IN THE NRP ARE BECOMING MORE ASSERTIVE, WHILE LIBERAL PARTY UNREST HAS FOUND EXPRESSION IN A VIRTUAL SPLIT FROM HERUT WITHIN THE HISTADRUT. THIS GRUMBLING IS A FAR CRY FROM OPEN REVOLT, HOWEVER, AND THE MINISTERS MOST SUSCEPTIBLE TO SUCH GRASS-ROOTS PRESSURE BY AND LARGE HAVE LITTLE CLOUT IN FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING. AMONG THOSE THAT DO, PRIMARILY DAYAN AND WEIZMAN, THE PICTURE IS COMPLEX.

11. AWARE OF THE NEED TO OVERCOME OR GET AROUND THE POLICY DIFFERENCES WITH THE U.S., DAYAN HAS HINTED AT A TINY MEASURE OF INDEPENDENCE FROM BEGIN'S WEST BANK POSITION AND AT THE SAME TIME APPEARS TO BE WORKING ON BEGIN FOR GREATER FLEXIBILITY, AT LEAST IN TACTICS. THE NEW FORMULATION ON242 IS WIDELY SEEN AS THE RESULT

OF THIS EFFORT-PERHAPS ONLY ITS FIRST FRUIT. AFTER
THE EGG WEIZMAN LAID IN HIS MARCH 24 MAARIV INTERVIEW,
HE HAS TURNED MORE CAUTIOUS. THE FACT THAT LEBANON HAS ABSORBED
MOST OF HIS TIME AND ENERGY MAY ALSO BE A FACTOR IN HIS
RECENT RETICENCE.

IN ANY CASE, WHILE STILL FRUSTRATED OVER THE NEOGTIATING
IMPASSE WITH EGYPT, WEIZMAN SHOWS NO SIGN OF REPEATING
SOON HIS THINLY-VEILED CHALLENGE TO BEGIN AND HAS
PROBABLY FORFEITED MUCH OF HIS POTENTIAL INFLUENCE OVER
BEGIN. SHARON, TOO, HAS ASSUMED A LOWER PROFILE. HIS WINGS
WERE SOMEWHAT CLIPPED WITH THE RECENT TRANSFER
OF THE POWER OF DECISION ON NEW SETTLEMENTS FROM HIS
COMMITTEE TO THE MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON SECURITY.
DESPITE HIS DECLINE SINCE HIS FREE-WHELLING DAYS OF
LAST JANUARY, HE GIVES NO INDICATION THAT HE WILL
RESIGN. THERE ARE THOSE WHO SEE BEGIN HOLDING ONTO
SHARON AS A COUNTER-WEIGHT TO WEIZMAN.

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12. IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, BEGIN REMAINS IN CONTROL OF FOREIGN POLICY AND WHILE HE IS IN OFFICE NO CHANGE CAN OCCUR EXPECT THROUGH HIM. HE CONTINUES TO BE TORN BY HIS COMMITMENT TO IDEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE--BUTTRESSED BY HERUT'S VOCAL RIGHT WING--ON THE ONE HAND, AND THE PRACTICAL PROBLEM OF NEGOTIATING PEACE ON THE OTHER. HE IS BESET BY DISILLUSION, WHICH APPARENTLY BEGAN WITH THE STIFF OPPOSITION HE ENCOUNTERED LAST JANUARY IN
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THE HERUT CENTRAL COMMITTEE MEETING WHICH NARROWLY CHOSE HAIM LANDAU FOR THE CABINET, AND BY A NEW PESSIMISM TRACEABLE TO HIS RECENT WASHINGTON VISIT. HE IS SAID TO BE LOSING HOPE IN ACHIEVING PEACE WITH SADAT. AT THE SAME TIME HE IS PROBABLY WRESTLING WITH THE IDEA OF MODERATING HIS POSITION ON THE WEST BANK. AS LONG AS HIS INTERNAL STRUGGLE CONTINUES, THERE IS A SLIM CHANCE THAT MODERATION MAY YET WIN OUT. INDEED, THE NEW APPROACH ON 242 MAY BE THE FIRST HAIRLINE FRACTURE IN WHAT HAS BEEN A FROZEN POSITION. BUT ANY MOVEMENT IN POLICY THAT DID NOT HAVE BEGIN'S APPROVAL WOULD NECESSARILY DEPEND ON A POLITICAL REALIGNMENT INVOLVING HIS DOWNFALL. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THIS IS AT HAND.
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Message Attributes

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TAGS: PEPR, PINT, OVIP, IS, (BEGIN, MENAHEM)
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